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RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 6850

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BANGKOK 001980

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN THAILAND: ENDURING VIOLENCE AND THE WAY FORWARD

REF: A. BANGKOK 1508 (RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE JUNE 8 MOSQUE ATTACK)

- 1B. BANGKOK 1388 (TWELVE KILLED IN MOSQUE ATTACK)
- 1C. BANGKOK 1320 (TAK BAI DEATHS)
- 1D. BANGKOK 941 (PROMINENT THAI NGOS RELEASE REPORTS ON ABUSES)
- 1E. BANGKOK 125 (NEW PM ABHISIT'S PLAN FORDEALING WITH THE INSURGENCY)
- 1F. BANGKOK 1167 (LOCAL OFFICIALS' VIEWS)
- 1G. BANGKOK 1061 (TARGETED KILLINGS)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B, D)

Introduction and comment:

11. (C) The conflict in Thailand's Deep South, which entered a new, more violent phase in January 2004, has ground on for five and a half years, cost some 3500 lives, and has no end in sight. At its core, the conflict is about identity, sovereign control, justice, and the Royal Thai Government's (RTG) ability to govern the region. There are no reliable statistics regarding the strength of the insurgency, or the degree to which the majority Malay Muslim population supports it. While defined by a unique regional identity associated with the historical Sultanate of Patani, the conflict in the South is also inextricably linked to national level governance issues. Any solution to the core issues driving the conflict must come from national level policy makers. Conflict mitigation efforts, without a national level component to strengthen Thai democracy, particularly the justice system and local governance, will be insufficient.

12. (C) Often out of the headlines, southern violence briefly overshadowed Bangkok politics during late May and June when a series of coordinated and brutal attacks on Buddhists and Muslims alike shook southern Thailand. Until now, the conflict has in the main remained an ethno-nationalist separatist insurgency, with a majority of victims Muslims killed by the Malay Muslim insurgents, though the mosque attack and reprisals raised fears of increased sectarian violence in the South. Absent a political settlement, concerns remain that the situation could deteriorate, become a magnet for regional extremist movements, or could affect our broader bilateral relationship with the Royal Thai

Government (RTG) were large scale human rights violations by security forces to occur.

¶3. (C) The RTG continues to be wary of outside interest in the conflict. Maintaining that the insurgency is an internal domestic issue, it has asked us not to get involved. We generally respect this RTG request; the insurgency is so far territorially defined, currently aimed at the RTG and those they feel collaborate with the Thai state, not the U.S., and separatists have not targeted U.S. or western businesses, USG offices, or tourist destinations. The presence of U.S. military or law enforcement personnel in the deep south would not benefit our interests, and would likely draw us into the conflict. Our military and training efforts in Thailand, however, teach skills and concepts to personnel who later put them to use in the South, which is a good thing. Staying uninvolved should not preclude our taking an active interest in the conflict's resolution.

¶4. (C) Moving forward, our bilateral policy goals with Thailand, as well as broader U.S national security interests in the region, will be served to the extent that we can indirectly help stabilize the situation in the South in cooperation with other partners and the RTG. We have implemented a mission-wide strategy to diminish the potential for radicalization and escalation of the conflict by promoting participatory governance and improving the administration of justice, in part using appropriated funds earmarked for this purpose. We are also pursuing discreet diplomatic engagement on multiple levels to signal the seriousness with which we view the conflict, and highlight our concerns about issues of governance, justice, and human rights. End Introduction and comment.

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The conflict's recent sharp edge

¶5. (C) The June 8 attack on the al-Fuguron Mosque in Narathiwat (refs a and b), subsequent reprisal killings, and the resonance the attack has had across Southeast Asia caused us to take to take a hard look at our conventional wisdom concerning the conflict in southern Thailand and review our policy stance towards the South. To the extent that statistics can define the state of the conflict, 2009 is shaping up to be a worse year than 2008. According to Deep South Watch, during the first five month of 2009, there were 429 violent incidents, some 334 injured, and 183 killed, including at least nine beheadings. Over the same five month period in 2008, there were 285 incidents, resulting in 327 injuries and 172 deaths. If there is any good news, it is that in 2009 the higher number of attacks is not resulting in a greater ratio of killed or injured per attack, reversing a trend of the past two years.

¶6. (C) As usual, statistics only tell part of the story; the state of the security in the South is a matter of subjective speculation. Embedded in these statistics are the eleven Muslims killed while praying during the Mosque attack, possibly by Buddhists seeking revenge for atrocities committed by Muslim insurgents that included the slaying of a pregnant school teacher and beheading of a rubber tapper in the neighboring district in the week prior. Insurgents have since been retaliating for the Mosque attack with a renewed campaign of violence; in a depressing cycle, violence begets violence in return. Much of it is Malay Muslims killing Malay Muslims.

¶7. (C) The Thai government continues to be wary of outside interest in the conflict, and tells us that the insurgency in southern Thailand is an internal domestic issue. We generally agree with this assessment. Most scholars and independent analysts contend that the fundamental issues driving the conflict are the inability of the RTG to implement legitimate participatory democracy in the Deep

South, and the frustration of a natural expression of Malay Muslim identity. The separatist insurgency is thus seen as the manifestation of localized Malay Muslim nationalism in violent resistance to perceived subjugation by the Thai state.

¶8. (C) Tapping into a deep-rooted sense of Pattani regional identity, the insurgents use extremist Islam as another tool to unify and motivate the Malay Muslim majority in the South.

Issues such as human rights abuses, a lack of justice, and an opaque legal system are important ancillary issues that fuel the violence and provide the insurgents with the support they need to carry out their fight. There are no reliable figures on the strength of the insurgency, or its level of support, but many of our contacts claim the insurgents enjoy a deeper level of support than the RTG is willing to admit, and continued RTG missteps add to that base.

Putting it in context

¶9. (C) The RTG response to the violence must be understood both in terms of the current political landscape and the protracted history of conflict that has existed between the Thai state and the Malay Muslims of the Deep South for over a century. Although the separatist insurgency does not pose an existential threat to the Thai state, it does challenge the Thai notion that a virtuous and strong central bureaucracy acts with the best interests of all Thai citizens in mind. A challenge to this notion is tantamount to a threat to a central tenet of Thai identity over the past century, as well as Thai style centralized governance.

¶10. (C) A century after King Chulalongkorn instructed his officials heading south to understand the needs and aspiration of the local populace in order to administer successfully, senior government officials still contend that the Malay Muslim population of the Deep South must be made to understand that the RTG has good intentions and is acting in

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their best interest. While enlightened officials and academics understand the general outlines of what must be done to achieve a political settlement in the South, Thai nationalism and national political turmoil in Bangkok has prevented any government from developing and implementing a successful strategy to deal with the fundamental issues of governance, legitimacy, and identity underlying the conflict.

¶11. (SBU) Politically, the insurgency and efforts at political resolution have little resonance outside the Deep South. Thai politicians for the most part are reluctant to tackle an issue that is fraught with political liabilities. Most of our contacts on the South agree that the current Democrat led government of Prime Minister Abhisit has the best prospect of moving the conflict towards resolution since violence reignited in 2004.

¶12. (C) Abhisit identified addressing the southern situation as a key priority as he entered office, has pursued a plan to reinvest civilian officials with authority over handling the southern insurgency, and is investigating the possibility of lifting the draconian security laws that allow security forces to detain and hold suspects without charges or trial. He also launched a "Southern Cabinet" to oversee relevant budget and policy issues, has vowed to establish a new organization directly responsible to the PM's office to take overall charge, and greenlighted the participation of a deputy Democrat Party leader, Kraisak Choonhaven, to take part in unadvertised confidential discussions with separatists facilitated by the Henri Dunant Centre in Jakarta. Subsequent to the late May Tak Bai court ruling that absolved security forces from responsibility in the deaths of 78 detainees in 2004 (ref c) and the al-Fuquron Mosque attack, the PM announced that he would be both open to discussions about a special administrative zone to in

southern Thailand to deal with issues of governance, and the possibility of "peace talks" to end the violence.

¶13. (C) Unfortunately, none of Abhisit's initiatives has resulted in any visible changes to the way the government and particularly military is handling the insurgency on the ground. In late June, Army Commander General Anupong Paochinda clarified in press statements that the political aspects of Abhisit's strategy, called "politics leading the military," extended only as far as economic development and education; there would be no discussions with insurgents. An ISOC representative confided to us subsequently that proposed changes to the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) were partially intended to give the military more authority over development and justice initiatives. Abhisit's coalition government continues to be fragile, and his right-hand man and coalition minder, Democrat Party SecGen and DPM Suthep, disagrees with any bold steps that might cross the military or jeopardize the coalition government's survival (ref E, F).

¶14. (C) Rule of law and justice also continue to be elusive issues for the RTG. Although Abhisit has repeatedly made statements that justice was a key element of the RTG southern strategy, government efforts to bring the perpetrators of the June 8 Mosque attack to justice have been slow, as have efforts to prosecute the soldiers found responsible for the torture and death of Imam Yapa Kaseng in 2008 (refs a, d). There are signs of possible progress on the mosque attack case, however; DPM Suthep told DCM in an August 3 lunch that the RTG had identified the suspects, who were not RTG officials, and issued warrants. Suthep expressed optimism they would make arrests in the case shortly and expedite other longer-standing cases.

Our perspective

¶15. (C) We believe the fundamental issues of governance impeding the RTG from making progress in quelling the insurgency are not unique to this conflict, or to the Deep South. They exist throughout Thailand and are manifested in: dysfunctional and weak law enforcement, internal security, and legal institutions; selective disregard for human rights;

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economic disparity and competition over natural resources; and a lack of opportunity for minority groups to express their identity. The separatist insurgency highlights these structural deficiencies, weakens the entire state, and directly challenges the integrity and legitimacy of the central government. Abuses such as the 2004 Tak Bai incident, as well as alleged targeted killings by security forces highlighted by human rights NGOs (ref G) have the potential--if proven or repeated--both to weaken our security relationship with Thailand and to threaten our ability to strengthen that partnership.

¶16. (C) The ongoing violence also strains Thailand's relations with other countries in the region and creates an environment that extremists and international terrorists could potentially exploit. We have no evidence to date of groups associated with regional or global extremist networks joining the separatist struggle. However, we need to keep in mind that developments like the mosque massacre or RTG missteps in its handling of the violence could eventually spark the type of internationalization of the conflict the RTG is so assiduously trying to avoid.

¶17. (C) This insurgency, like many conflicts of this nature, likely could not exist without an external support network; there are clear indications of personal links to both Malaysia and Indonesia. Close embassy contacts have repeatedly asserted to us that the separatist movement has made a conscious choice not to allow foreign fighters to take part in the violence. However, these same contacts maintain

that much of what passes for the movement's leadership is fragmented and insular, with decisions about operations made at the locally. It is unclear whether this fragmented leadership can actually control the violence, and possibly who takes part. The Tak Bai ruling and the mosque attack have resonated loudly in Malaysian and Indonesian Islamist media. Unless concrete issues of justice, cultural space and governance are resolved, the violence will continue, possibly drawing increased attention from outside elements that could pose a more direct threat to US and national level RTG interests.

What we are doing

¶18. (C) Thailand is a friend and a treaty ally. Although we identify core issues driving the violence as being national in nature, at the end of the day this remains an insurgency and a question of who exerts sovereign control over the Deep South. The RTG has repeatedly asked us not to get involved because of the internal nature of the conflict. We have obliged them for the most part, partially out respect for the bilateral relationship, but primarily because we do not believe that significant U.S. involvement in the conflict benefits our interest. Quite the reverse: it in fact could negatively affect our interests by making us an issue in the conflict, which we now are not.

¶19. (C) Staying uninvolved in "the fight," however, should not preclude our taking an active interest in the conflict's resolution. Our bilateral policy goals, as well as U.S. national security interests, are served to the extent that we can indirectly help stabilize the situation in southern Thailand, in cooperation with the RTG as well as other partners. Ultimately, we would like to see the RTG resolve the conflict in accordance with international norms of human rights, democracy, and rule of law. Any resolution, however, will require the Thai government to have the political will to make the national level decisions necessary to eliminate the conditions feeding the insurgency, including an expansion of local governance and community empowerment.

¶20. (SBU) We are pursuing our interests in resolution of the southern conflict through a mission-wide strategy intended to diminish the potential for radicalization and escalation of the conflict by promoting participatory governance and improving the administration of justice. Diplomatically, we quietly engage the RTG on multiple levels regarding our governance, counterterrorism, and human rights concerns. To

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date, this approach has met with some success; the RTG has become more forward leaning in discussions about the conflict.

¶21. (SBU) Our assistance programs are intended to address issues of justice and governance at both the national level and locally in southern Thailand. The bulk of this programming is being implemented by USAID, but it also includes a Public Affairs (PA) small grants program to promote consensus building, conflict mitigation, and conflict resolution, and Transnational Crimes Affairs Section (TCAS) training focused on increasing the effectiveness and professionalism of the judiciary and Royal Thai Police. Total programming for the South in FY08 was some \$4.2 million. FY09 funding is similar.

¶22. (C) We do not believe the presence in the deep south of U.S. military or law enforcement personnel will benefit our interests. Given the persistent belief in the south that the U.S. is either behind the heavy handed tactics used by police and military, or is behind the violence in some other fashion, the presence of such personnel would only serve to involve us in the conflict. To this end, we have instituted a "locations and labels" policy that restricts police and military training to locations outside the Deep South, and

prohibits labeling any police or military training as directly intended for the Deep South. Obviously, however, our military and law enforcement training efforts in Thailand provide skills to Thai personnel who may later apply them in the South.

What more can we do

¶23. (C) Continued high level diplomatic engagement is vital, as is assistance targeted at national level democratic governance and justice issues. The conflict in the South is inextricably linked to national level governance, and any solution to deal with the core issues driving the conflict must come from national level policy makers. Conflict mitigation efforts, without a national level component to deepen Thai democracy, particularly the justice system, decentralized local governance, and minority community empowerment, will be insufficient.

JOHN